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"If Necessary for Years, If Necessary Alone": History, Memory, and Fiction in Contemporary Representations of Dunkirk

Abstract
A seemingly impossible task, the evacuation of the majority of the British Expeditionary Force (more than 300,000 men) from the shores of Dunkirk, besieged by the German forces, represented a symbol of hope in a moment in which the British Empire was suffering crushing defeats in Europe as well as in Asia. The myth of the 'finest hour' of the British people, both spontaneously generated from below and directed from above by the government, has been a central topic of the British propaganda during and after the war, and it still possesses a strongly evocative power over new generations of artists. In recent years, several movies (*Atonement*, 2007, *Dunkirk*, 2017, *Darkest Hour*, 2017) have represented the evacuation of Dunkirk, oscillating between propagandistic rhetoric and a problematization of the memory of the war. By analyzing these films, this article shows how post-war generations have appropriated the cultural memory of Dunkirk as a way of restaging an ideal of Britishness and at the same time as a controversial attempt to update it by highlighting the divisions of class and ideology among British society and the army.

The evacuation of the majority of the British Expeditionary Force (more than 300,000 men) from the shores of Dunkirk took place between 26th May and 4th June 1940 when troops were besieged by the German forces. This seemingly impossible task represented a symbol of hope in the crucial years of the war, when the British Empire was suffering crushing defeats in Europe as well as in Asia. The myth of the 'finest hour' of the British people and of the Commonwealth ("produced with apparent spontaneity from below and sometimes engineered politically from above by crown and government", Gilroy 2004, 97) largely depended on the capability of the army and the fleet to endure the military catastrophe and to prepare the counterattack that led to the final victory in the war. Indeed, this event still possesses a strongly evocative power over new generations of citizens and artists. In this essay I will analyse two recent movies which were released in 2017, Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* and Joe Wright's

Darkest Hour (with a reference also to *Atonement*, 2007, by the same director), highlighting their simplified portrayals of the evacuation. I will focus on recent examples to show the vitality, persistence and ambiguity of this myth even in the present day. While these movies suggest varying degrees of distance from, and criticism towards, the mainstream version of Dunkirk, they all portray some main features: unity against the common enemy, heroism, and the role of the civilian fleet. Despite certain attempts to debunk the myth of Dunkirk (especially in Nolan's case), these movies fail to provide a portrait of the evacuation that is not jingoistic.

According to Paul Gilroy, "there is something neurotic about Britain's continued citation of the anti-Nazi war" (2004, 97). The emphasis of the memory of the Second World War, with particular reference to the iconic event, Dunkirk, represents a way to return to a moment in which a clear and uncomplicated idea of British identity supposedly still existed and when "the national culture [...] was, irrespective of the suffering involved in the conflict, both comprehensible and habitable" (97). "That memory of the country at war against foes who are simply, tidily, and uncomplicatedly evil," Gilroy continues, "has recently acquired the status of an ethnic myth" evoked to refuse a discussion of the reality of the post-war period and present problems of the country. Gilroy labels this problematic relationship of Britain with its past "postimperial melancholia" (98). Following on from Gilroy's suggestion, this article shows how Dunkirk has been the object of an ambiguous post-memorial process, becoming both a mythical moment in British history and a continuous presence in the present of the nation.

Two 2017 films, *Dunkirk* by Christopher Nolan and *Darkest Hour* by Joe Wright, represent the evacuation of Dunkirk by oscillating between propagandistic rhetoric and attempts to problematize the memory of the war. Dunkirk reinforced the notion of the British as an island people, willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause and with a great capacity of improvisation. Nevertheless, such romanticised accounts of the evacuation leave out several uncomfortable facts. For example, the British failed to help the Belgians in the defense of their country and many French soldiers were abandoned during the retreat. The British Expeditionary Force was poorly and inappropriately equipped, and military tactics failed to elaborate and react to the new German *blitzkrieg* strategy witnessed in Poland. Moreover, the German forces did not explicitly aim to annihilate the BEF, but rather to march rapidly on Paris. Finally, and most importantly, the contribution of civilian boats was very small in the overall context of the evacuation, which itself was made possible by the efforts of the RAF and the indecision of the German command. On the contrary, civilian

boats often proved to be ineffective, sinking in the channel or remaining stuck on the shore of Dunkirk.[1] The press exaggerated the boats' role, which was so insignificant in the success of the evacuation that Churchill himself omitted it in his speech on 4th June. All of these facts depict a historical situation rather different from its popular reception, according to which the BEF was left alone in danger of total annihilation while the combined effort of the military and the British people managed to save it. This being said, the films I analyze here prioritise and afford more space to the popular version of the myth of Dunkirk over and above the historical one. Thus, I intend to show how post-war generations have appropriated the cultural memory of Dunkirk as a way of restaging an ideal of Britishness and, at the same time, have controversially mobilised the events of Dunkirk in order to blur the divisions of class and ideology amongst British society and the army.

I argue that Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholia is relevant to Dunkirk, which represents, in British public memory, a synecdoche of the Second World War. The long and expensive military effort necessary to win the war was too costly for the financial and industrial system of the United Kingdom to bear, eventually resulting in the collapse of the Empire. As Angus Calder has argued, "the greatest single fact suppressed by the Myth of the Blitz is this: in 1940, because Churchill refused to give in, world power passed decisively away from Britain to the USA" (1994, 53). In other words, the celebration of Dunkirk as a culminating moment of heroism coincides with its being the last widely remembered military success of the British forces. It is fitting, in this sense, that this success consists of a retreat.

The memorialization of war is usually aligned with a country's propaganda and with the self-representation and interpretation of the war's participants (Connelly 2004, 4). It comes as no surprise, then, that the myth of Dunkirk has a long history, which can be traced to its immediate aftermath, when the government and newspapers exaggerated the merits of the army and the civilian fleet (Calder 1994, 97-98; Summerfield 2010, 790-791). During the decades that followed the war (a period of general decline for the United Kingdom both economically and in terms of foreign politics) a plethora of movies and documentaries about the war were produced. The memory of the war, with particular emphasis on the episode of Dunkirk, was widely evoked in public and private contexts. This process was so pervasive that, as Geoff Eley argues,

[1] These details can be found in Calder 1994, 90-118. For a summary, see also Summerfield 2010, 789, note.

"'remembering' World War II requires no immediate experience of those years. [...] Consciously and unconsciously, this field of connectedness to the war became worked into public discourse in inspiring, insidious, and enduring ways, making an active archive of collective identification" (2001, 818-819).

As Penny Summerfield highlights in her most important study of the early cinematic representations of Dunkirk, during wartime and its immediate aftermath the memory of the evacuation was not monolithic. In 1942, two movies about the evacuation were released, *Mrs. Miniver* (an American production, received enthusiastically in England) and *In Which We Serve*. Whilst the former placed great focus on the civilian effort to save the BEF, in the latter the civilian fleet did not appear (Summerfield 2010, 796). This attention to the episode of Dunkirk in British cinema was even more significant after the war, with almost 100 movies about the war released between 1945 and 1963. Many of these were box-office successes (779). Once again, the account of the events was not univocal, and some cases (for example Alex Holmes's *Dunkirk*, 1958) were critical of the army and the military leaders. Nevertheless, the vast amount of productions concerning the evacuation nourished the popular memory of Dunkirk as an extraordinary event and a celebration either of the army or of the British people's determination to never surrender (809).

Many of these movies belong to the "drama-documentary" category, which means they merge "the conventions of narrative cinema [...] with documentary techniques" (Chapman 2007, 16). Narratorial consequentiality and continuity montage editing are employed together with *typage* ("casting actors who physically resemble the social types that they are portraying"). They often follow a group rather than an individual protagonist, as typical of documentaries. The effect of this authorial choice is that, of course, the portrayal of individual stories is balanced by collective events, to the extent that a commonality develops between the destinies and merits of war heroes and the collective expression of the nation (16).

"Winston's Civilian Fleet." The People's War in *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*

Despite attempting to offer an uncomfortable depiction of the evacuation by including the fights amongst the British and their allies, *Dunkirk* nevertheless indulges in an extremely patriotic interpretation of events, which recuperates the memorialisation of the evacuation. The movie tells three stories taking place in Dunkirk. Each story has a different timeframe and covers a different natural

element and part of warfare. The first timeframe focuses on a British private and his attempts to be embarked to England during the week before the evacuation. The second covers the crew of a civilian boat during the day before the evacuation and their fight with a shell-shocked soldier they rescue who refuses to go back to the French shore. The third covers one hour of the fight between a British aviator and a German plane.

Nolan's film seems to aim for an ideal and abstract representation of the retreat as a timeless allegory for the human condition. Similarly to the drama-documentary discussed above, the film follows individual stories, but the details about the characters' personal lives and features are reduced, forbidding the viewers to empathise with them and suggesting the evacuation was a collective event. The caption that opens the film does not name the Germans, referring them simply as "the enemy;" and the British troops are said to be waiting for "a miracle." It is indicative that the enemy is never shown in person, not even during the battles: the viewers can see German bombs and machinery, but never other human beings. When, in the last minutes of the movie, the aviator (played by Tom Hardy) destroys his plane and surrenders to the Germans, their faces are shown unclearly in shadows. Similarly, there is almost no display of Union Jacks among the British forces.

To reinforce this absoluteness and abstractness, the spaces in which the film is set are either liminal (like the beach) or spaces connected with movement and journey (i.e. the air, the sea) that are all empty and deprived of human presence. Similarly, the soldiers do not crowd the beach chaotically. Instead, they wait their turn in lines, breaking them only when the menace of a bomb appears and forming them anew shortly after. Therefore, the spaces of Nolan's movie are almost metaphysical spaces, suggestive of a general uncertainty for the future rather than national identity. This sense of uncertainty is reinforced by the soundtrack of the movie composed by Hans Zimmer. Zimmer employs the Shepard tone, an auditory illusion that creates "a never-ending sensation of rising or falling" (Rapan 2018, 137), keeping the audience in a perpetual state of anxiety.

What is significant within Nolan's representation of the war is that, despite its lyrical and epic elements, it does not hide the internal fights among the British forces as Wright's film does, and as the popularized memory of the war tends to do. In the second time frame, a shell-shocked soldier is rescued at sea by a civilian boat after the shipwreck of his own plane and ends up fighting the members of the crew when they tell him that they intend to go to Dunkirk to help the army evacuation. During this fight, he kills a teenage boy by throwing him down the stairs of the boat. Even more significantly, in another scene, a fight among the

Allied forces hiding in a trawler and under fire by the enemy results in the death of a French soldier. Not only is such a scene suggestive of the disagreements between the British and the French, and the lack of cooperation between the armies that made German victory possible, but also (referring to the Highlanders Regiment) of the rivalries between different identities within the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that Nolan's movie has been criticised for its lack of portrayal of different ethnicities, specifically of Indian soldiers, who were indeed present on the shores of Dunkirk with several regiments (Naahar 2017).

Despite these episodes, Nolan's film participates in a representation of Dunkirk that welcomes several tropes of the popular memory of the evacuation. Except for the aforementioned scene in the trawler, conflicts (most notably class conflicts) are absent, and there appears to be general concordance between the officers and the troops; whilst historically the heads of the expedition were widely criticised for their lack of preparation. Nolan shows Commander Bolton, the officer that supervises the evacuation, refusing to leave the beach in an act of heroism. Played by Kenneth Branagh, a popular actor and arguably an incarnation of idealized British aesthetics and values, the Commander is, significantly, a fictional character. The behaviour of real-life officers during the retreat was much more ambiguous and open to criticism.

Most significantly, the movie devotes a large amount of screen space to the role of the civilian fleet (approximately one third of the movie), despite the fact that, as noted above, such efforts were largely exaggerated in the aftermath of the operation for propagandistic purposes. Mr. Dawson (played by Mark Rylance), the owner of the private vessel, is portrayed as a taciturn and reserved middle-aged man who has no hesitation when it comes to serving his country. Similarly, his son and his teenage friend are portrayed as enthusiastic youth who help during the war effort. Moreover, since the viewers are shown the sinking of a British destroyer leaving Dunkirk, Dawson's boat is one of the few sea vehicles that successfully fulfills its task, thereby suggesting that the civilian fleet had the same impact on the evacuation of the British military float. The emphasis on the role of the civilian fleet is intended to suggest the unity of the nation as a whole against the difficulties of the war; interestingly, when Branagh's character sees the float approaching he says he sees "home."

Finally, the movie ends with a soldier reading aloud from a newspaper the speech that Winston Churchill delivered to the House of Commons on 4th June, at the end of the evacuation, as their train arrives at Woking and they are welcomed by the cheers of the crowd. In Nolan's movie, Churchill's speech,

alternated with images of the abandoned shore and accompanying the return home of the soldiers, is used as a symbol of the will of the British people and as a source of inspiration and closure for those involved.

Something similar happens in Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour*, a political drama focusing on Winston Churchill's attempt to convince the parliament to continue the war effort without reaching a peace treaty with the Germans. The movie spans from the forced resignation of Neville Chamberlain due to pressure from the opposition and his own party, to the end of the evacuation of Dunkirk. Essentially it covers that very short period of time during which the British finally understood the superiority of the German army at the time, and nearly risked losing the war.

The entire movie plays on the opposition between Churchill, shown as a popular outsider determined to win the war, and his political opponents, the cold politicians aiming for appeasement. Churchill, histrionically played by Gary Oldman, is portrayed as an awkward and idiosyncratic old man often expressing himself with wit and mottos, whose faith in victory is opposed to the ambivalences of his political rivals. In this sense, the opposition that the movie creates is not simply between a strong, unconventional leader and weak politicians, but also between a man of the people (as the aristocratic Winston Churchill becomes over the movie) and royalty and upper-class politicians. Significantly, while Churchill undertakes sorties in London among the people, his adversaries are shown only in the bunker and the dark corners of the House of Commons as conspirators rather than political leaders.

The movie's climax focuses on Churchill's war cabinet's resistance to the decision to continue hostility towards the Germans. Chamberlain and Lord Halifax insist that Churchill explicitly refuses to consider peace negotiations, since Churchill's refusal would force him to resign, leading to the election of Halifax as Prime Minister. Contrary to their reasonable but short-sighted proposal of negotiations and their narrow-minded political intrigues, Churchill's faith proves unshakeable, if not in victory, at least in his ability to evacuate the troops. It is not a coincidence that the prudent proposals of Chamberlain and Halifax are contrasted with iconic phrases that either show Churchill's determination ("You cannot reason with a tiger when your head is inside of its mouth") or his sarcastic unconventionality ("Will you stop interrupting me while I am interrupting you?"). Churchill's wittiness as a tool of seduction and persuasion returns in the underground scene, and most importantly at the end of the film when he has to convince the members of the parliament to sustain his decisions.

Churchill's unconventional personal manners are opposed to the snobbish and stiff attitude of his opponents. Since his first appearance on the screen, there is a focus on the details of Churchill's eccentric private life that functions at times as comic relief. In fact, the first thing we learn about Churchill is his breakfast habits, which include a cigar and a glass of scotch. His distance from everyday life, made clear when he makes the mistake of showing the photographers a V sign with the back of his hand (unaware of its rude meaning), or claims he has never taken a bus, are portrayed as signs of idiosyncratic awkwardness rather than aristocratic snobbism. Churchill's role of outsider is also underlined by his relationship with King George VI, who initially strongly dislikes the manners and the fame of the new Prime Minister (compounded by his personal friendship with his rival Lord Halifax). Nevertheless, Churchill gradually gains the support of the King, who functions as a symbol of the unity of the nation. His support becomes a synecdoche for the support of the British people.

Most importantly, these personality traits are overcome and forgiven in the underground scene, in which Churchill descends to the underground to interrogate the citizens of London about his decision to reject the negotiations. Here Churchill verifies the willingness of the British people to continue the fight and symbolically receives the mandate to refuse the peace negotiations. This utterly fictional scene is so pivotal in Churchill's resolution that, towards the end of the movie when he addresses the members of parliament, he backs his claims by naming the people he spoke with on the underground. This scene serves to obscure the class struggles of British society, presenting an aristocratic Prime Minister receiving suggestions directly from everyday citizens. The film's depiction of Churchill as an egalitarian man of the people reaches its extreme when the Prime Minister converses with a person of colour, with whom he exchanges Shakespearean quotes. Here, we most clearly see Wright's attempt to colourblind as well as de-class British society and diminish the colonial responsibilities of the British Empire – and indeed of Churchill himself.

Moreover, the movie only shows us glimpses of Churchill's personal responsibilities in the disaster, as there is no mention of his initiative in the failure of the Norwegian campaign. Nevertheless, another military disaster is mentioned, one that occurred under Churchill's initiative: the Gallipoli campaign, during the Great War. Halifax accuses Churchill of being so vain he prefers risking another Gallipoli than giving up on his ideas, to which Churchill answers that Gallipoli was the navy's fault, and this affirmation ends the argument. In other words, while not highlighting Churchill's responsibilities in the defeat, Wright chooses to show his role in another, chronologically distant

iconic defeat, without insisting too much on it; and he does so to humanize his protagonist. As Calder argues, "the more the fallibility of Churchill is emphasised, the more lovable his heroic bearing becomes, and the more superhumanly he appears" (1994, 90).

Despite its focus on the evacuation of Dunkirk, the film does not dedicate much screen space to military issues, which are discussed rather simplistically and unproblematically. For instance, it is suggested that the defeat is France's fault, while in reality it also depended on the errors of the British army. France's acceptance of defeat in the allied colloquia is represented farcically, with Churchill struggling to speak intelligible French and the French heads of State mocking him for his belief in victory. Similarly, the responsibility for the success of the evacuation is shown as largely dependent on the civilian fleet; which, once again, is used to underline the united will of the nation against its internal and external enemies. In an important shot, the civilian vessels are shown in front of the cliffs of Dover, while no similar symbolical treatment is reserved for the military navy. The role of civilian boats is exaggerated in order to show Churchill as a man of the people. It is worth noting that, despite being presented in the closing credits as "Winston's civilian fleet," Churchill did not mention it in his 4th June speech.

In addition, the editing of the film suggests that Churchill's iconic "We shall never surrender" speech (forming the title of my article) is delivered while the evacuation is still being performed, but in fact it was delivered after it ended. By changing the chronology of the speech and the evacuation, the speech scene at the movie's end highlights once again how Dunkirk is portrayed in *Darkest Hour* as a moment of national unity and heroism, and also the direct effect of Churchill's effort alone, who received his task directly from the hands of the British people.

Although the brevity of this contribution does not allow me to treat it extensively, it is worth mentioning another movie by Wright, *Atonement* (2007), which shares some significant tropes regarding the representation of Dunkirk with *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*, and which in many ways anticipates Wright's treatment of the evacuation in his later work. This becomes more obvious if we compare the movie with its literary source, Ian McEwan's novel with the same title (2001), in which the complex metafictional frame, paired with the narrator's unreliability, casts a shadowy light on the process of memorialisation of the Second World War. A central moment in the novel is, of course, the description of the Dunkirk evacuation. The importance of this passage becomes more significant by the ending, when the narrator Briony tells the readers that Robbie did, in fact, die there, and he did not manage to survive as we were previously

told. Nevertheless, the part of the novel dedicated to the Dunkirk evacuation is everything but propagandistic. McEwan carefully represents the conflict's chaos, classism and the internal struggles amongst the British soldiers, debunking the myth of the 'finest hour.'

Although faithful to the novel's plot, Wright's movie presents a version of the facts of Dunkirk more coherent with the national myth of the heroic evacuation. In the central part of the movie dedicated to Dunkirk, Wright tries to render the tragedy and the difficulties of the retreat, but he also tones down the more controversial issues raised by McEwan about the operation and the British army. For instance, it is significant that it is not specified that the men with Robbie are corporals, and there does not seem to be any conflict between them. In McEwan's novel, Robbie is more educated than they are, but lower in grade, and they outrank him but they follow him because they cannot read a map. On the contrary, in the film he simply appears to be their leader. In the novel, this conflict is highly symbolic of the class issues that pervaded British society: Robbie was lower class but had the chance to study at Cambridge thanks to a scholarship, and his manners and accent contrast with the corporals who, for reasons of class difference, despise him. However, in Wright's film the two men seem naturally prone to follow Robbie because of his intellectual superiority, and their relationship is not problematised.

Moreover, to suggest the unity of the Empire and the equality of its subjects, one of the corporals is a person of colour, a detail that was not specified in the book. Such an attempt to limit the colonial responsibilities will return in Wright's *Darkest Hour*. In the movie, the scenes of conflict between the soldiers and the officers that characterized the novel are also absent, and the scene of the RAF man nearly lynched by the crowd is omitted. In the squalor and danger that was the reality of Dunkirk and, indeed, McEwan's rendition of Dunkirk, the film's soldiers do not show signs of conflict among themselves, instead they help one another and sing patriotic songs to increase morale.

Finally, Wright's film inevitably lacks the metafictional complexity of the novel. Briony's unreliability as a narrator, although present in the film, is not as accentuated as in the novel. Her confession, for example, is shorter and simplified, taking the form of an interview instead of a private diary, thus allowing less space for recollection and reasoning. Most importantly, while the novel ends with Briony reflecting on the power and the ambiguity of fiction, allowing to recreate (for Cecilia and Robbie) the happiness that her childhood mistake prevented, the movie ends with a short sequence after the confession showing Robbie and Cecilia happy together on the beach.

The novel's metafictional frame retrospectively suggests that readers have inhabited one person's obsession and invites them to re-think the story with a sense of betrayal and claustrophobia. The movie, on the other hand, simply parallels the two possible endings and uncritically privileges the 'happy' version. The novel's profound reflection on the fragility of memory, the deceptiveness of fiction, and the narcissism of self-representation framing the account of the Dunkirk evacuation are intended to comment on the memory of the war itself. In other words, McEwan employs an unreliable narrator to invite the reader to doubt our knowledge of history, and, in complementarity with this purpose, he provides an anti-rhetorical debunking of the retreat. Not only does Wright, by contrast, provide less space for the metafictional frame, ending the movie on an alternate finale that reduces *Atonement* to a romantic love story, he also presents the evacuation as a moment of national unity and pride. By avoiding the representation of the class conflicts and abuse amongst the soldiers, Wright recreates an account of Dunkirk that is essentially coherent with its popular memory and the loosening of the metafictional frame of the novel sanitises McEwan's epistemological choices.

Conclusion

The two films analysed (together with *Atonement*) provide a pacific and mostly unproblematised interpretation of Dunkirk, in contrast with historical facts and other fictionalisations of the event. In light of the difficulties of the present, and on the verge of a new situation of isolation after Brexit (Jack 2018), these directors represent a United Kingdom ready to fight (to quote Churchill) "if necessary for years, if necessary alone."[2] Nolan and Wright choose to follow a widely popularised interpretation of Dunkirk without contradicting its mythologies, including the importance of the civilian fleet. Whilst the Second World War represented the end of global British hegemony and the rise of the American

[2] The directors, nevertheless, distance themselves from such a reading of their work. According to Nolan, who notes that Brexit took place while the movie was being shot, "as a filmmaker, you can't control the world that your film goes out into. It is a story about community. It's a story about people coming together in the face of evil. And I think different political groups taking that to mean different things means they're ignoring certain elements of the film" (Wiseman 2017). Similarly, Wright states that the parallels with Brexit "were there, but my job is to tell the story very specifically in the context of what was happening at that time. And to offer up scenarios and questions" (Sims 2017).

empire, it is interesting to note that these films do not consider this aspect of the conflict. Both filmmakers prefer to represent Dunkirk as a defense of the "island home" rather than centralising its imperialistic interests, thus confirming Gilroy's reading of the memorialization of war as a neurotic attempt to hide the nation's crimes. Although Churchill's peroration evokes the intervention of the American ally, symbolizing and foreseeing the dependency of England on the US, this effect of the war is never faced. At the same time, the army is never represented as an imperial, trans-national force, as the film fails to accurately depict soldiers from the colonies and the Commonwealth, and similarly omits non-English British nationalities, except for the aforementioned isolated case. Such omissions suggest a desire to erase the memory of a colonial past, a desire that projects itself very much onto the present. At the same time, the emphasis on the retreat of Dunkirk as a moral victory and a source of national pride functions as a repression of the collapse of the British Empire that the participation in the Second World War caused, unfolding across the decades that followed.

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